

INTERVIEW:

Mr. Jim Michaels from the USA Today interviews Commanding General, General Ray Odierno, Multi-National Force – Iraq

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MR MICHAELS: [Laughs.] Well, great. Well, again, General if I could just jump right in here. One of my questions is you describe the security gains which have been fairly dramatic over the past years as still reversible and fragile. At what point do they become more durable? How do we know when they become irreversible or at least [inaudible]?

GEN ODIERNO: There's a couple things that we have to be able to do. Again, in '07 and the beginning of '08, clearly we have improved security. However, to make it more durable there's a few things we have to do. One is we have to continue to get a national vision—Iraqis have to have a national vision. They have to have more of a political accommodation across the board. We have to...one of the key things is we have to be able to...the Iraqi government has to be able to deliver consistent services, specifically electricity is probably the most important. They're working towards this, but if they don't do

this, the citizens over time will start to, in my opinion, potentially start to move against the government if they have to wait too much longer for services or if they don't see progress in services. And then you have, of course, still the influence of the outside organizations. Although al-Qaida has been degraded, they still have capacity and they will always try to increase their capacity. So the most important thing is you have to make sure that the population does not provide the passive support to al-Qaida. And what has happened is they have rejected al-Qaida. But if the government fails them, what would happen? And that's one of the concerns. So that's why it's important. We have to...that's why the next step are these issues such as delivering services, political accommodation, and reconciliation. Those all become very important to make sure that we move beyond fragile.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. And I notice you say the Iraqi government has to do this. You're not talking about the United States.

GEN ODIERNO: No.

MR MICHAELS: It seems to be a huge change from a couple of years ago.

GEN ODIERNO: It is. Now, we play a role because we have to help...we have to help

them with this. We have to try to influence them to move forward. We are partners with them in moving forward, but they are in the lead. And to be honest with you, what I've really come in and told the commanders on the ground is that in '07 and the beginning of '08, we were foc-...in '08, the first half of '08, we were really focused on reducing...improving security, reducing attacks. Now we're moving towards trying to help the Iraqis now achieve full sovereignty. So that's by maintaining the security, building Iraqi capacity both for Iraqi Security Forces – continue to do that – as well as capacity of services, capacity of budget, capacity...and so on. And then the political accommodation. So that's what's changed. And I see that changing.

MR MICHAELS: Now, I've noticed in the little time I've been here that we seem to be practicing...we're a little tougher now with the Iraqi Security Forces in the sense of whereas before they may have asked us for stuff and we've said, yeah, sure—anything to get you out on patrol. And now, I was out in Anbar and they ran out of gas, the police, and this time [inaudible] I think, you know. Is that a trend?

GEN ODIERNO: It...well, again, it's...it is about them becoming more self sufficient. It's about them...they are now in the lead. They have now taken over security responsibilities. And although we will help them if we

believe it's absolutely necessary, we want their systems to work. We have now started to put their systems in place. We want to watch them make those systems work.

MR MICHAELS: How...I know you're...you haven't made your assessment yet, but how sort of confident are you about troop reductions, say, in the coming year?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I would just say that, of course, obviously the ones that have been announced, the 8,000 – the one brigade and some other enablers and the battalion – that General Petraeus and I talked about those reductions, so I'm very much in line with those reductions. And I think that those are good decisions. As we look to the future, do I think we'll be able to further reduce in '09? I do. If we currently go along the path that we're going, I think we'll be able to do further reductions. But there's a couple of key things that happen in '09 that we have to make sure occur. One is the provincial elections that will now occur sometime in January, I believe, the end of January. We have to make sure that those elections occur and obviously that they are free...that they are both perceived and actually free and fair elections, and we're able to support the international...the High Electoral Commission of UNAMI in executing those elections and allowing the Government of Iraq to

walk through these elections. The second is, at the end of the year there's going to be national elections...

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: ...where we have a change [inaudible]. Those are two very key pieces as we move forward, in my mind, moving from a fragile to a more stable Iraqi government. You have a transfer of power. You have an election where you decide who your national leader is going to be. You have provincial elections where, based on 2005, you had many people that were not represented in their local governments where now they...

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: ...I believe they will be because I think everybody will participate in these elections. So I think it's important to watch what is the aftermath of those elections? How does that occur? So we have to make sure that we have the forces on the ground to make sure those things happen in a proper way. Again, I believe if things continue along a little bit, we'll be able to continue to reduce our presence. But I believe it has to be done deliberately. We have to do it carefully to make sure we don't step backward. Because there will

be many people who try to influence and exert their control if they see any seams whether it be al-Qaida or whether it be special groups supported by other countries.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. Clearly we have to be cautious, but there's—and your issue is Iraq and not Afghanistan. But they've asked for more brigades there and so forth. I mean at some point does the Pentagon say to you, you know what, General, you're going to have to accept a little more risk?

GEN ODIERNO: What I owe them is my assessment.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: And then they...then the national security team then has to make a decision on what their policy is going to be. Again, I am not...it's my job to describe[?] what we need and no more. Understanding the worldwide situation.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: And then if...and then what I have to do, it's all about risk. It's all about how we can mitigate risk. But what we don't want to do is

reduce too fast and move backwards here which, in my mind, would cause significant problems for us if that occurs.

MR MICHAELS: Speaking of which, and this is kind of a tougher question. But, I mean, you're going to make an assessment clearly. You're going to have a new administration. Both administrations have sort of made their Iraq policy fairly clear. Is there some point where you say, well, this is my recommendation, this is my assessment and you're...to the administration, you're rejecting it. I have to resign or something like that?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I think you're getting way too far down the road here. I mean my job is I have a mission. I provide a recommendation on that mission. I provide, to whoever the new administration is, my recommendations. I give them risk. They then tell me this is what I think I want to do and I continue to conduct that mission. I mean it's not....

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: In my mind, it's not that...it's my job to execute the mission I'm given by the commander in chief. And in my mind, the choices aren't that stark where I have to say, oh, my God, I can't do this.

You know, I'll do whatever I can. Now, my experience tells me that whoever the new administration is, they will listen to what we have to say. They will then conduct their own assessment and we'll move on from there. And I'm confident in that.

MR MICHAELS: You feel pretty comfortable?

GEN ODIERNO: I feel comfortable with that.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. Can I talk a little bit about Iran? What's your sense on what they're doing now?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean, again, I find it very interesting that—let's take the security arrangement we're now currently negotiating where they clearly are trying to influence the outcome of that security arrangement. They continue to want to, in my mind, meddle in internal Iraqi politics. They want to meddle in internal Iraqi decisions. They want to try to have influence. They want to try to control the outcome. They, you know, they don't, in my opinion, don't want Iraq to move forward as a fully sovereign nation. They don't want them to have a bilateral agreement with a country. They'd rather have them have a UN Security Council resolution. A bilateral agreement is about Iraqi achieving its full sovereignty,

having an agreement with another country. So I think they are...they continue to want to meddle inside of Iraqi business. They continue to still...it's clear they are still supporting some lethal aspects of what's going on here in Iraq through training and funding and equipping. They've toned it down a bit, but they're still doing it. So, again, it's about...in my mind, it's about having Iraqi achieve its...Iraq achieve its full sovereignty, whether to continue to establish itself and become a player in the international community. At some...you know it's clear to me that Iran wants to meddle. And so it's important that, you know, Iraq understands this and I think they do actually.

MR MICHAELS: And where do you think they've toned it down a bit?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean, again, I think that, you know, they dial it up and down but I think they've...the support to groups has probably been a little bit less than it was in 2007, late, and the beginning of 2008. And we encourage that. We applaud that they reduced the support. However, it's not...they have not stopped completely.

MR MICHAELS: And do you think they've reduced it simply because tactics on the ground has necessitated that? Or do you think they've reduced it for...from strategic [inaudible].

GEN ODIERNO: Yeah. It's unclear. I believe it's probably a little bit of both.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. And there've also been some reports that Iranian hit teams running around. What's your sense of that?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, what we're seeing is a change in tactics by both al-Qaida and the special groups or these special rogue elements that have been trained in Iran. And what you're seeing is they're going after...they're conducting intimidation, assassinations against government officials or the Iraqi Security Forces or the other officials, trying to intimidate. And we've seen that because they have been unsuccessful in the other ways they've tried to have influence. You know their attacks on the population have backfired, both on al-Qaida and special groups. Where now al-Qaida has been rejected. The militias have been rejected inside of Iraq. People support their security forces. So that backfired. So they're now trying to figure out other ways they can affect. I think one is now through these assassinations and intimidation. And so although it's at much lower levels, it's something that we have to watch and work with the Government of Iraq.

MR MICHAELS: And you said al-Qaida's trying to [inaudible] up. I mean Al-Qaida's

still not getting anything from Iran now. You're saying they're [inaudible].

GEN ODIERNO: No, no, no. I think that they have both come to the same conclusion on how they want to move forward in terms of what they're trying to do. Al-Qaida, mainly up in Northern Iraq.

MR MICHAELS: Right. And how prevalent is this now? I mean are they [inaudible].

GEN ODIERNO: Again, I would say—and I'm not sure I would call them hit teams.

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: I would just say the tactics of assassination, kidnapping, intimidation. Whether there is specific hit teams or not is unclear. But I would say is, again, I think it is prevalent in small areas. For al-Qaida it seems to be more prevalent up in Northern Iraq where we're still, you know, we're still trying to eliminate their influence up in Ninawa Province, up in and around Mosul. For the special groups, we see a little bit more of it around in Baghdad. So it's, you know, again, it's at very low levels. I don't want to exaggerate the [inaudible].

MR MICHAELS: Sure.

GEN ODIERNO: But it is out there and it is occurring.

MR MICHAELS: And is it aimed at Iraqi officials...

GEN ODIERNO: It is.

MR MICHAELS: ...primarily? Not American.

GEN ODIERNO: It is aimed at Iraqi officials.

MR MICHAELS: And how would you des-...? Al-Qaida is down but not out. I mean you seem to suggest that they keep a presence here and will assert themselves when they can.

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean I think when they're able to. I mean I think we, you know, the foreign fighter flow into Iraq has significant decreased. Their abilities...I mean they have...many of their safe havens have been eliminated. But they are still here. They currently are predominantly up in Northern Iraq in much smaller numbers, with much less support areas, much less safe areas. But they are still here. What concerns me is if we take a step backwards – and it has

to do, again, with the population – and we lose the population because we don't have political accommodation because we're not able to provide the services. That could push them back towards providing support to al-Qaida and they would take advantage of that. That's the concern. And they would grow again and try to reassert their control.

MR MICHAELS: Any sense that al-Qaida sort of made a strategic decision that maybe targets of opportunity are better in Afghanistan and they just can't get ahead [inaudible]?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I don't know. What I would say is we've seen the flow of foreign fighters decrease here. Have they maybe temporarily refocused in Afghanistan? Maybe. That doesn't mean they would not refocus here again if they saw an opportunity. So that's why it's important for us to make sure they don't have that opportunity.

MR MICHAELS: Do you think—and this is sort of a...I guess sort of become a political issue—but do you think that al-Qaida sees Iraq still as the central front?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean they still on their Web sites, I think, say that Iraq is the central front for that.

MR MICHAELS: And do you believe that they...?

GEN ODIERNO: I think if they had the opportunity they would like it to be the central front.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: I think, you know, again, I think that they have, you know, even looking at Al Madri's[ph] recent statement where he admits in his own statement that they've been severely degraded in Iraq and that they continue to have problems with the population. The Sons of Iraq...the Sons of Iraq working with the coalition force have significant impact on al-Qaida's network. I mean I think that tells you there that things have become much more difficult for them here in Iraq.

MR MICHAELS: And you've talked about the necessity of the Iraqi government sort of taking over a lot of this and stitching it together. The Sons of Iraq seem to be the first major test of that. Are you concerned a little bit that the Iraqi government is not taking this as...?

GEN ODIERNO: No. I'm not. Again, we're going through a transition period so there

will be bumps along the road as we transition. But I've met with Prime Minister Maliki twice on this. I feel very confident that he has made the decision to integrate, starting with Baghdad in October. And I think he is...the Sons of Iraq inside of Baghdad. He is...I think in good faith he is moving forward in doing that. We have had several meetings over the last few days at many levels to help make sure this transition occurs properly. Our commanders are linked with the Iraqi commanders. I feel like we have a process in place to monitor this. Could there be some issues? Probably. But I think we can work through most of them. I think the intent is very good from the Iraqi government.

MR MICHAELS: Did the problem...? it seems to me somewhat in the past is that even though Prime Minister Maliki has said that and really believes it, oftentimes if the levels of government all the way down are not....

GEN ODIERNO: Yeah, well, what's important this time is first, he has issued very specific guidance. He has directed his commanders that they will integrate all of the Sons of Iraq into...put them under contract. He's saying you will not arrest any Sons of Iraq unless there's a warrant from the judge. I mean he's been very specific. And I feel very confident, having been briefed by Iraqi commanders on the ground, that they understand this. And for sure, General Abud, the

commander of the Baghdad Operational Command, we have discussed this. And we are very much in line with each other and in agreement on the Sons of Iraq.

MR MICHAELS: When you look out at Iraq, I mean what percentage of the country do you think is in a...maybe a secure, you know...?

GEN ODIERNO: I would say around 80% or more. Again, I hate to put a percentage on it.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: But all of the south is under...is, for the most part, going very well. Anbar Province is going well. I would say a large portion of Baghdad is going very well. There's, again, somewhere—I'd say even Diyala Province has improved significantly. Still have some minor problems in Diyala Province. We have problems up in Ninawa Province in the north. But beyond that, I think for the most part, the security is moving forward fairly well.

MR MICHAELS: So at this point it's only a question of sort of getting Iraq's government to be able to embrace this and move it forward.

GEN ODIERNO: It's about getting their com-...yeah. It's about, you know, as we talk about.... I would say in 2006 it was a failed state. In 2008 it's a fragile state. We've got to move it to a stable state. And that has to do with making sure the Iraqi Security Force can do this on their own. Now, we are still doing—although security is good, we are doing an awful lot behind the scenes with the Iraqi Security Forces. So what we want to do is reduce that dependence. We want to continue to build their capacity. We've got to, again, we've got to be able...we have to...the Iraqi government has to provide the services as I said earlier. And we have to have political accommodation across the board. And those are the three elements that will move us forward to stable state. And the two elections will contribute to that. The provincial elections and then the national elections in 2009.

MR MICHAELS: Any idea on how long it will take to get from fragile to stable and then...?

GEN ODIERNO: I don't. You know, I think—I don't know. I see it as a, you know, it will take some time. I can't predict how long it will be.

MR MICHAELS: Are you concerned at all that the American public may be drifting away from this issue or losing interest?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, I mean in some ways I think what's good is I think the American public realizes we've made some progress over here. What I worry about is they don't realize how that it can move backwards if we're not careful. So, again, what I would tell them is we are making progress. It is fragile progress. We have a very good plan, I believe, to continue to move forward. We're going to turn more over to the Iraqis. We'll deliberately and slowly reduce our presence here to make sure we don't lose the gains that we've had. And I think overall will contribute to the overall security of our nation. And that's how I'd describe it to them. And deliberate, you know, is a relative term. I mean, again, I want it to be based on the conditions on the ground. That doesn't mean we can't do it in a relatively short time period, but it should be based on conditions. You know I would argue that we have gotten ahead...we have moved faster than we thought we would have when we built our plan in 2007 for the surge. I would tell you that it has moved faster than we thought it would.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. Which...does that raise hopes that the future will go faster?

GEN ODIERNO: All I'm saying is...

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: ...it has gone faster and I believe, you know, again, if condi-...you don't know, it could.... People get afraid of the word conditions because they think that means it's going to drag it out. But I'm telling you, conditions could make it speed up as well.

MR MICHAELS: What are the mi-...what's the timing in terms of your making an assessment? Do you want to have an assessment by a certain time?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, again, I do a constant assessment.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: But I believe, you know, the current reduction that has been announced will be completed in January, early February. The provincial elections will occur in January. So I believe, you know, I will look sometime after that period to see what happens after the provincial elections, what happens after we further reduce the 8,000. At that time, it will be time for me to do a reassessment so I think that is the next step.

MR MICHAELS: What will that recommendation look like? In other words, do you

think it will go out, say, a year or nine months and say that we'll be able to reduce [inaudible].

GEN ODIERNO: Unclear. I think what I would like to do...what.... The problem with announcing something like that is if you make...if some of your assumptions are wrong.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: But what I would like to do is probably do it in 6- to 12-month increments.

MR MICHAELS: And by that, what would...?

GEN ODIERNO: So, for example, you know, sometime in early 2009, make a recommendation where we might be in the summer of 2009. And see how that goes and then make [inaudible] be at the end of 2009. We keep doing it in six month increments.

MR MICHAELS: And so in each increment you would recommend a troop reduction within...

GEN ODIERNO: Potentially. Or not a troop reduction.

MR MICHAELS: ...within that timeframe?

GEN ODIERNO: But again, I have to work all that. I haven't really talked about the timelines with the secretary or anything. But, I mean, I think that's how...I don't think there will be much disagreement with what we've talked about before.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah. And have you...and you've briefed sort of both potential candidates?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, no, I haven't. I mean I have not specifically briefed them. They've taken care of that in Washington.

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: So I have not talked to either one of the candidates. I have not talked to either one of the campaigns. You know my guess is, once the election's over and whoever it is, I think I'll then have a chance to....

MR MICHAELS: To brief them. Yeah. And you're, again, you feel comfortable with both from what.... What, as you're sorting of looking ahead, I mean

it...you mentioned the elections and [inaudible]. Are there things that you're particularly worried about beyond that or is...?

GEN ODIERNO: Well, again, it's the political accommodation. It's continuing to watch to have a national vision, look at the political accommodation. We've seen some increase in Kurd/Arab tensions.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: And so it's about that type of political accommodation. But we have to be careful...we have to look through, you know, again, as security improves, you know, and as the situation continues...it's an evolution. And as it evolves, you...other things happen. And one of them is looking at this interaction, looking at the political accommodation and we have Article 140...

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: ...and the disputed territories. [Inaudible] Iraq, Kirkuk. That's another one where we have to look at it very close-...very carefully.

MR MICHAELS: Any idea on the SOFA? When...?

GEN ODIERNO: No. I mean what I tell my Iraqi counterparts is we must have some sort of legal framework to continue to operate in your country. And our current legal framework ends at 31 December.

MR MICHAELS: Right.

GEN ODIERNO: So we have to have some legal framework. And I'm hoping that they'll be able to work the agreement. The teams are on the ground now working with the Iraqis.

MR MICHAELS: Well, what's your sense that the...that's...is it the jurisdictional issue? Is that sort of what's hanging them up?

GEN ODIERNO: I don't know. I don't know. There's...I...you'd have to talk to them. I mean I don't know. It changes from day to day. So I...you'd be better off asking the people here doing the negotiations that question. What's interesting is my sense that it is...when you talk to the Iraqi people, you talk to the military, you talk to all the people, all my commanders, [inaudible] battalion [inaudible] discuss it, all the Iraqis realize that they believe they need us here...

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: ...for a period. I don't usually talk, you know, it's not here for two more years or three more years. So in my mind, there's no doubt that the Iraqi people know they need us here in order to continue to move forward. They do not want us here for a long time. But they know they need us here for some period of time in the future. So based on that, I know that, you know, for the most part, I think they understand about having some sort of an arrangement with us. So what we now have to do is work that with the political leaders. And, you know, that's what's going on now.

MR MICHAELS: Do you think some of the statements are sort of designed for internal consumption or...?

GEN ODIERNO: They're politicians.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: You know, so they've got to do....

MR MICHAELS: My last question, General, is do you get involved in the budget stuff at all?

GEN ODIERNO: Yes.

MR MICHAELS: Is there...do you get the sense that the Iraqis are spending what percent of their...this massive [inaudible].

GEN ODIERNO: We track it very closely.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: What we try to track is their capital budget. Because they have one type...part of the budget pays salaries. That's not a problem. The issue is about the capital budget, which is designed for reconstruction and services. And, you know, we track it by province.

MR MICHAELS: Yeah.

GEN ODIERNO: And it varies from 100% obligated or spent to 40%, depending on the province. A lot of it has to do with the internal make up and the ability of the province themselves to have the capacity to do this. Our Provincial Reconstruction Teams and our brigades are there trying to assist them and help them move forward. The budget process has worked very well from the national. They have allocated the budget. They have been very good at allocating the

money to the provinces. It's now about spending the money down at the provinces. And spending the money in some of the ministries – the Ministry of Electricity, the Ministry of Oil. And it's about getting the contracts out. We've seen some contracts announced here lately from the Ministry of Electricity. And we need some announced by the Ministry of Oil. That will help in the long run to increase infrastructure. And so we have to continue to help them and assist them in working their way through spending their money. Again, I think the will there is to spend it. They have the will to spend it. They're allocating the money. It's now about building their capacity to actually spend the money. And there's still a cultural issue inside Iraq where, you know, again, under the old regime, you were not...you were rewarded for not spending the money and doing it. You know, so there's a...we still overcome some of those cultural issues as we work our way through this.

MR MICHAELS: Right. Thank you very much. I appreciate you taking the time. Good luck on everything.